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A

LETTER

FROM A

GENTLEMAN

TO HIS

NEPHEW

AT

OXFORD,

1772.

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

LETTER, &c.

DEAR ——,

I Will give you my Opinion (as you deſire it) of Mr. *Burke*'s Philoſophical Enquiry concerning the Sublime and Beautiful: But this muſt be only by Way of looſe Obſervations, and not as a formal Criticiſm on it, or as an Anſwer to it. I have not Leiſure to employ my Thoughts ſo idly. I find by your Letter, that the Faſcination of his Language almoſt cheats you out of your Underſtanding. And this, I preſume, is the Caſe with moſt of

his Readers: By which Means his Book has quickly paſſed through ſix Editions. And on this Account it is, that he is ſuppoſed by many to be Author of the Letters in the News-Papers, ſigned *Junius:* But I think that the Antitheſis, and nervous Stile of thoſe Letters, is different from Mr. *Burke*'s metaphorical and florid Manner of Writing. Leaving this Matter to Conjecture, I will proceed on the Book.

I looked upon it as an entertaining Eſſay, notwithſtanding I think there wants Truth to ſupport his Hypotheſis. He has a wonderful Attachment to Diſpoſition and Method: But his Propoſitions are ill-founded. His Definition of the Sublime is new, as you obſerve, and I will add, a Peculiarity of his own, and abſurd: For his Principles (or Data

Data if you pleaſe to call them ſo) are not generally true.—He tells us, that *Whatever is fitted in any Sort to excite the Ideas of Pain and Terror, is Sublime.* So Serpents and other noxious Animals, and Inſects, are with him *a Source of the Sublime.* They may occaſion Fear and Pain; but it is paſt my Comprehenſion to find the Sublime in ſuch Creatures. What is there of Sublime in the Sting of a Waſp, or Bite of a Serpent? Is there any Thing of Dignity, any Thing wonderful in the Idea, any Thing that elevates the Soul? Theſe are, in my Opinion, neceſſary Properties of the Sublime.

I acknowledge that Mr. *Burke* is well verſed in Moods and Figures: and that there are many ingenious Thoughts, and judicious Obſervations in his Treatiſe: But there are like-

likewiſe many fooliſh ones. Amongſt theſe, I think, is the Reaſon he gives, why Dogs are *contemptible and deſpicable*. This is very far fetched indeed: Becauſe, *as a Term of Reproach*, we ſay of a Man, he is a *ſad* Dog, or a *vile* Dog. And ſo it is, ſays he, in other Languages, P. 116.—This is not writing like a Philoſopher, inveſtigating the Nature and Properties of Things. *Dogs are familiar and amiable, we love them, therefore they are contemptible and deſpicable.* There is a Syllogiſm for you. This is ſtrange Logick. He gives no other Reaſon but that above mentioned, which ill agrees with the Title of his Book. Many of the canine Species are of the ſublime Kind, even according to his own Ideas. The ſtately Grey-hound, the ſagacious Bloodhound,

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the fierce Maſtiff. In whoſe Idea are theſe contemptible, but in his own? The Cat is a familiar Animal more ſuited to the Idea of Contempt: But poſſibly the Gentleman is afraid of Cats; and therefore would claſs them under the Rank of ſublime Creatures, *as exciting Terror.*

When I ſaw *Infinity* at the Head of the 8th Section of the 2d Part, I expected ſomething truly Sublime, as the Subject is; but was much diſappointed: That Section being very trifling; and not worth a Remark.—

I cannot be of his Opinion, that *the Idea of Infinity and Eternity excites the Paſſions, even of the Vulgar, more than the Idea of Things that we are acquainted with, and have a Knowledge of.* Vide P. 105. This ſeems

ſeems to me as chimerical a Notion as that of Lord *Shafteſbury*, who maintains, that the Lovelineſs of Virtue is a ſufficient Guide to moral Rectitude. They muſt underſtand little of human Nature, who think in this Manner. The retired Philoſopher, walking in his ſequeſtered Groves, and wrapt up in Solitude, looks on this World but as a Place of momentary Abode; *(We view the goodly Scene, and viewing paſs)* and might feel the *Divine Impulſe*, as he calls it. But Lord *Shafteſbury* was not ſo abſurd as to think that *it is thus with the Vulgar, and all Men are as Vulgar in what they do not underſtand: And perhaps there is nothing of which we underſtand ſo little, as of Infinity and Eternity.* And yet *this Obſcurity and our Ignorance herein cauſes our Admiration,*

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and chiefly excites our Paſſions; according to Mr. *Burke*. This Notion of Mr. *Burke*'s I mark as one amongſt his Reveries, that is very far from Truth. Surely the Affections and Paſſions of the Vulgar are more forcibly moved by Objects, which preſent themſelves to our Senſes, and by the Conception of Things *which we have a Knowledge of*, than by the Contemplation of ſuch profound Subjects as Infinity and Eternity; which to the moſt Learned are not clear and diſtinct Ideas, but imperfect and confuſed ones. The more obſcure the Idea, the *leſs* affecting he ſhould have ſaid. It would be tedious, and I think unneceſſary, to go into a particular Enquiry concerning the Paſſions of the Vulgar of every Denomination,

from the *ignorant Nobleman* to the *illiterate Mechanick.*

In Page 119, he ſays, when we contemplate the Omnipreſence of God, we ſeem in a Manner annihilated before him. He mentions his Power too it is true; but combining theſe two Ideas together, and thence making the Inference, placing his Omnipreſence the laſt as of moſt Force in ſuch Contemplation, betrays a Defect of Judgment, or an Inaccuracy that is highly cenſurable. To contemplate the Immenſity of his Power in the Formation of the Univerſe, is ſuch an Idea as would make us ſhrink into the Minuteneſs of our own Nature, and be in a Manner annihilated before him: But the Conſideration of his *Omnipreſence* annihilates, as I may ſay, that very Idea; and teaches us, that how-

however *minute* we are, we cannot be overlooked by him, whoſe Preſence is every where; who pervades all Nature, and by whom the very Hairs of our Heads are all numbered.

You muſt not expect me to go through every Particular of his Propoſitions. I mean only to point out a few Blemiſhes that diſpleaſed me, *en paſſant*. And indeed he is ſuch a ſlippery Writer, that one cannot hold him to any certain Principles: Being inconſiſtent with himſelf, he denies in one Place what he affirms or implies in another.

You will find he aſſerts, that Beauty is no Idea belonging to Menſuration; that Proportion does not belong to Beauty in Building; and has nothing to do in Painting: That Darkneſs conſtitutes the true

Sublime; and Littleneſs is an eſſential Property of Beauty. His Ideas are ſingular, as I ſaid before. With reſpect to Architecture; to avoid Prolixity, let him only go into *Whitehall* Chapel, and I think he will there ſee *(though but naked Walls)* what may be of the Sublime without Darkneſs, and the Beautiful without Littleneſs: That Building is more ſo, than any Part of his College, at St. *Omer*'s. I believe no good Architect would neglect *Proportion* and a Symmetry of Parts in either a ſublime or beautiful Building. Nor do I imagine that a Painter, if he ſhould be employed to draw a complete *Venus*, would think this Part of his Art not eſſential to *Beauty*. Though I never could be perſuaded, that the *Opinion* of a Man *dead* is of more Authority than

than the *Opinion* of a Man *living*; (as you are taught both in School and at the Univerſity to believe) yet I cannot forbear mentioning the Opinion of *Cicero* on this Subject. He ſays, *Pulchritudo Corporis aptâ Compoſitione Membrorum movet Oculos, & delectat hoc ipſo, quod inter ſe omnes Partes quodam Lepore conſentiunt.* Cicero de Off. Lib. i. Sec. 92. Mr. *Burke* is ſo complicated in his Arguments, that he cannot help ſometimes admitting this, in Contradiction to his own general Propoſitions. But it is clear to me that he knows not the firſt Principles of theſe Arts.

You will ſee a curious Reaſon for *Littleneſs* being an eſſential Property of *Beauty*, in his Sect. of *Beautiful Objects ſmall.* Juſt ſuch a ridiculous one as that which he gives before,

before, why Dogs are *contemptible and deſpicable*. His Reaſon in favour of Littleneſs is, becauſe in our Language, and in all the Languages he has any Knowledge of, Diminutives are expreſſive of Endearment. *Darling*, for Inſtance, ſays he, in our Language. But, with his Leave, *darling* is an Expreſſion not always appropriated to *Littleneſs*; nor does it neceſſarily imply *Beauty*, as he inſinuates. Big and little are relative Terms, and can only be applied comparatively to the Subject of which we are ſpeaking, be it of what Nature or Kind ſoever; whether a Hill, a Houſe, a Dog, or any of the human Species. And what you would call beautiful in a Hill or Houſe, &c. has nothing to do with *Littleneſs*. Mr. *Burke* not attending to this, occaſions much Confuſion in ſeveral

Parts

Parts of his Treatiſe. If you will allow me to be a little jocular, (as *Vellum* ſays in the Play of the *Drummer*) I think one may, from his Idea, find his Taſte for Women. I imagine his *Darling* is ſome little Woman with little Eyes; and that he is not ſparing in his Compliments on ſuch charming Accompliſhments. One may eaſily conjecture this; becauſe, according to his Ideas, neither *Proportion*, nor *Fitneſs*, nor *Perfection*, are Properties of Beauty. But *the real Cauſe of Love, and the firſt poſitive Quality of Beauty is Littleneſs.* Vide the Section before mentioned.

Of Animals.—Wherefore is the little Cur Dog more *beautiful* than the Hound? And will he ſay that *Proportion* has no Share in the Preference

ference of Beauty betwixt one Dog and another of the ſame Species?

Of Birds.—Is not the Swan or Dove as beautiful as the Sparrow? If we go to Trees or Flowers, we ſhall not find that Littleneſs of each Kind conſtitutes any Part of their Beauty. The Cheſnut is more beautiful than the Apple-Tree; though of a larger Growth; the Roſe and Lilly, than the Snow-Drop or Butter-Flower. Compariſons would be endleſs. I hope I have ſaid enough to ſhew, that his Notion of *Littleneſs*, being an eſſential Property of *Beauty*, is void of Truth.

Of Smoothness.—He too much prefers it to all other Surfaces in Point of Beauty. Is my plain Watch-caſe as beautiful as a fine chaſed one? Will an experienced Artiſt be of that Opinion? Will a Child think

think ſo of it? I believe not. By the Way, what Similitude is there betwixt the Movements of a Watch and the outſide Caſe, whereon to form a Compariſon of Beauty, as he does, Page 200?

What ſhall I ſay to his ſmooth Water, and his Idea of a Landſcape? If he had ſeen the delightful bubbling Streams and beautiful Caſcades of Water in the late Mr. *Shenſtone*'s Grounds, at *Hales Owen*, I think his Ideas would have taken a different Turn. However, they appear to me more *beautiful* than any ſmooth Water I ever ſaw in my Life. Poſſibly he may have a Predilection for the Lakes of his Country, and therefore calls his own Feelings true Taſte. In a Landſcape, whatever he may think, the Diverſity of Hill and Dale is more *beautiful* than a

level Plain. To uſe his own Words in another Place, *the Variation of the one is pleaſing and beautiful*; *the Sameneſs of the other wearies and diſſipates the Attention.*

You think that Mr. *Burke* gives very good Reaſons why there is Terror in Darkneſs. He does ſo; and his Reaſons are very obvious ones: But I ſuppoſe Mr. *Locke* would have ſaid, Sir, I am ſpeaking of a ſimple Idea. I do not deny that an Aſſociation of other Ideas may make Darkneſs terrible: I have granted it, on aſſociating thoſe of Hobgobblins and Spirits: And all that you advance is but an Argument founded on another Aſſemblage of Ideas; *the Dangers from Robbers or Enemies, or the Fear of falling down Precipices, &c.* You may perhaps ſay, that the firſt are Nonentities, and

and only *imaginary Ideas*; the laſt are actual exiſting *Sources of Terror*: Yet to a Mind that apprehends both to be Realities, the Effect is the ſame; and you will find the Cauſe to be, in both Caſes, a compounded Idea. If I go down from my Bed-chamber in the dark, to fetch ſomething out of the Parlour, as I often do, I do not find in my Mind any Conceptions either *terrible* or *ſublime*. My little Boy of three Years old will hide himſelf in a dark Cloſet, and ſhut the Door, without any fearful Ideas.

In Page 276, he pretends to demonſtrate, that *a black Colour is painful in its natural Operations, independent of any Aſſociations whatſoever*; by telling us a Story, from Mr. *Cheſelden*, of a Boy born blind, and continued ſo till he was thir-

teen or fourteen Years of Age. Among many remarkable Particulars, ſays he, that attended his firſt Perceptions, and Judgment on viſual Objects, the firſt Time the Boy ſaw a black Object, it gave him *great Uneaſineſs*. From whence Mr. *Burke* concludes, that *this Horror could not ariſe from any Aſſociation*. To me it evidently appears that it did; for as Mr. *Burke* ſays ſoon after, *Blackneſs is but partial Darkneſs:* There is no Doubt therefore that this *great Uneaſineſs* had Relation to his former State of *Darkneſs*. By Aſſociation of Ideas even a *beautiful Object* may create *uneaſy Senſations*. For inſtance; if I were to have the Misfortune to loſe my Wife; and I ſhould afterwards ſee a Perſon that was an *exact Reſemblance* of her, it would call to my Remem-

Remembrance *my former Condition*, and fill my Mind with painful Reflections; though no Man will ſay, that Beauty, ſimply conſidered, is *painful in its natural Operations*. In one Caſe, indeed, the Conceptions riſe gradually and ſlowly; in the other, the *Reflection* is inſtantaneous. All I contend for is, that the Colour was not to the Boy merely the Impreſſion of a ſimple Idea, *independent of any Aſſociation*; as Mr. *Burke* imagines.

As to the Account he gives us of *Campanella's being able to enter into the Diſpoſitions and Thoughts of People by a Compoſure of his Face and Geſture into a Similitude of the Perſon he intended to examine*, I look upon it only as an exaggerated and improbable Story of Mr. *Spon*'s; introduced by Mr. *Burke* amongſt his

his Chapters of the Efficient Cauſe of the Sublime and Beautiful; which ſeem to have been added with a Deſign to ſhew how well he has attended the Anatomical Lectures. I ſhould write you a longer Letter than this I have already written, (for it would lead me into a wide Field of Speculation) if I were to enter upon a Subject which preſents itſelf to me: I mean, how far the different Arrangements and Qualities, or Modifications of Matter in the bodily Organs, may tend to excite different Ideas in the Mind. You know what Effect the hot Quality of Lady *L*——*r*'s Blood has had: and you ſee how the cool Temper of Miſs *C*——*e*'s Conſtitution leaves her Soul at Quiet, to act according to the Dictates of Reaſon and Conſcience. I know a Lady, who owns that

that ſhe is bleſſed with every Comfort ſhe can wiſh for; a good Huſband, good Circumſtances, good Children; and yet ſhe is frequently melancholy, ſhe knows not why. And another of my Acquaintance is always gay, without the Advantages of outward Circumſtances. I think we muſt ſay of the one, *Anima illa malè habitat*; and of the other, *Ejus Anima rectè locata eſt.* I do not intend by what I have obſerved, to exclude the Probability of there being a Difference exiſting in Souls themſelves: For much may be argued on the Superiority of mental Power in certain Perſons over others, on every Occaſion, and in every ſimilar Situation. But I would not have you puzzle your Brains with theſe abſtracted Ideas. Mind the

Law:

Law: You will find it puzzling enough to engage all your Thoughts.

To return to Mr. *Burke*.—Notwithſtanding the Faults I have taken Notice of in his Philoſophical Enquiry, (and more perhaps might be mentioned which I paſſed over) I think it is not only a Work of pretty Fancy and Ingenuity, but his Thoughts are admirably well expreſſed in moſt Parts of it: And his Beauties upon the whole are nearly equal to his Imperfections. I ſuppoſe you can logically prove I am wrong, if I ſhould ſay, he is a good Orator, but a bad Reaſoner. Then I will ſay, what amounts to the ſame Thing, he pleaſes the Imagination, but miſleads the Judgement; and is what I ſhould call a miſty Writer. To point out what

is

is to be admired, and what is beautiful in this Eſſay, would be too long a Taſk, for me to undertake; and therefore I will quit the Subject; and ſubſcribe myſelf

YOUR AFFECTIONATE UNCLE.

London,
18th March, 1772.

I approve of your very juſt Cenſure of him for thinking that an ignorant Clown may receive as much Pleaſure from an ordinary Piece of Art as the moſt exquiſite Judge can from the moſt perfect; whether the Subject be Painting, Sculpture, Poetry, or Muſick. You mention his due Veneration for the Holy Scriptures, which is very obſervable; and may be aſſigned as one Reaſon for the Applauſe he has met with.

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THE END.